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The Early Narratives of Genesis

by

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The subject I have been asked to speak on is a large one, and is complicated with many questions—critical, archæological, scientific, exegetical. You will therefore bear with me if many points have to be touched upon in a cursory manner, and if some things have to be omitted altogether on which you would probably wish to hear me speak.

The subject is the Early Narratives in the Book of Genesis. By the Early Narratives are to be understood the first eleven chapters of the Book—those which precede the times of Abraham. These chapters present peculiarities of their own, and I confine attention to them, although the critical treatment applied to them is not confined to these chapters, but extends throughout the whole Book of Genesis, the Book of Exodus, and the later history with much the same result in reducing them to legend.

We may begin by looking at the matter covered by these eleven chapters with which we have to deal. See what they contain. First, we have the sublime proem to the Book of Genesis, and to the Bible as a whole, in the account of the Creation in Gen. 1. However it got there, this chapter manifestly stands in its fit place as the introduction to all that follows. Where is there anything like it in all literature? There is nothing anywhere, in Babylonian legend or anywhere else. You ask perhaps what interest has religious faith in the

doctrine of creation—in any theory or speculation on how the world came to be? I answer, it has the very deepest interest. The interest of religion in the doctrine of creation is that this doctrine is our guarantee for the dependence of all things on God—the ground of our assurance that everything in nature and Providence is at His disposal. "My help cometh from the Lord which made heaven and earth." Suppose there was anything in the universe that was not created by God—that existed independently of Him—how could we be sure that that element might not thwart, defeat, destroy the fulfilment of God's purposes? The Biblical doctrine of creation forever excludes that supposition.

Following on this primary account of creation is a second narrative in a different style—from chapter 2: 4—but closely connected with the first by the words, "In the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven." This is sometimes spoken of as a second narrative of creation, and is often said to contradict the first. But this is a mistake. As the critic Dillmann points out, this second narrative is not a history of creation in the sense of the first at all. It has nothing to say of the creation of either heaven or earth, of the heavenly bodies, of the general world of vegetation. It deals simply with man and with God's dealings with man when first created, and everything in the narrative is regarded and grouped from this point of view. The heart of the narrative is the story of the temptation and fall of man. It is sometimes said that the Fall is not alluded to in later Old Testament Scripture, and therefore cannot be regarded as an essential part of revelation. It would be truer to say that the story of the Fall, standing there at the commencement of

the Bible, furnishes the key to all that follows. What is the picture given in the whole Bible—Old Testament and New? Is it not that of a world turned aside from God—living in rebellion and defiance to Him—disobedient to His calls and resisting His grace? What is the explanation of this universal apostasy and transgression if it is not that man has fallen from his first estate? For certainly this is not the state in which God made man, or wishes him to be. The truth is, if this story of the Fall were not there at the beginning of the Bible, we would require to put it there for ourselves in order to explain the moral state of the world as the Bible pictures it to us, and as we know it to be. In chapter 4, as an appendage to these narratives, there follows the story of Cain and Abel, with brief notices of the beginnings of civilization in the line of Cain, and of the start of a holier line in Seth.

Next, returning to the style of Gen. 1—what is called the "Elohistic" style—we have the genealogical line of Seth extending from Adam to Noah. You are struck with the longevity ascribed to those patriarchal figures in the dawn of time, but not less with the constant mournful refrain which ends each notice, Enoch's alone excepted, "and he died." This chapter connects directly with the account of creation in Genesis 1, but presupposes equally the narrative of the Fall in the intervening chapters. We often read in critical books assertions to the contrary of this. The "Priestly writer," we are told, "knows nothing" of a Fall. But that is not so. Wellhausen, that master-critic, is on my side here. Speaking of the so-called "Priestly" sections in the story of the Flood, he says, "The Flood is well led up to; in Q. (that is his name for the Priestly

writing) we should be inclined to ask in surprise how the earth has come all at once to be so corrupted after being in the best of order. Did we not know it from J. E.? (that is, the Fall Narrative)." Another leading critical authority, Dr. Carpenter, writes in the same strain.

Then you come to the Flood story in Genesis 6: 9, in which two narratives are held to be interblended. There are two writers here, criticism says—the Elohistic and the Jehovistic—yet criticism must own that these two stories fit wonderfully into one another, and the one is incomplete without the other. If one, for instance, gives the command to Noah and his house to enter the Ark, it is the other that narrates the building of the Ark. If one tells of Noah's "house," it is the other that gives the names of Noah's sons. What is still more striking, when you compare these Bible stories with the Babylonian story of the Deluge, you find that it takes both of these so-called "narratives" in Genesis to make up the one complete story of the tablets. Then, following on the Flood and the covenant with Noah, the race of mankind spreads out again as depicted in the Table of Nations in chapter 10. In verse 25 it is noted that in the days of Peleg was the earth divided; then in chapter 11 you have the story of the divine judgment at Babel confusing human speech, and this is followed by a new genealogy extending to Abraham.

Such is a brief survey of the material, and on the face of it it must be acknowledged that this is a wonderfully well-knit piece of history of its own kind which we have before us, not in the least resembling the loose, incoherent, confused mythologies of other nations. There is nothing resembling it in any other history or

religious book, and when we come to speak of the great ideas which pervade it, and give it its unity, our wonder is still increased.

Ah, yes! our critical friends will tell us, the great ideas are there, but they were not originally there. They were put in later by the prophets. The prophets took the old legends and put these grand ideas into them, and made them religiously profitable. If that was the way in which God chose to give us His revelation, we would be bound gratefully to accept it, but I must be pardoned if I prefer to believe that the great ideas did not need to be put into these narratives; that they were there in the things themselves from the very first.

The truth is, a great deal here depends on your method of approach to these old narratives. There is a saying, "Everything can be laid hold of by two handles," and that is true of these ancient stories. Approach them in one way and you make them out to be a bundle of fables, legends, myths, without historical basis of any kind. Then wonderful feats can be performed in the handling of the myths. Prof. Gunkel, *e.g.*, that very capable Old Testament scholar, is not content with the analysis of books and chapters and verses, but adds to it the analysis of personalities. He will show you, for instance, that Cain is composed originally out of three distinct figures, blended together, Noah out of another three, and so on. I have ventured to describe Gunkel's theory as the explanation of the Patriarchal history on the ancient principle of a fortuitous concourse of atoms. Only that does not quite answer to the kind of history we have in these narratives, which stand in such organic connection with the rest of revelation. Approach these narratives in another way and they are

the oldest and most precious traditions of our race; worthy in their intrinsic merit of standing where they do at the commencement of the Word of God, and capable of vindicating their right to be there; not merely vehicles of great ideas, but presenting in their own archaic way—for archiac they are in form—the memory of great historic truths. The story of the Fall, e.g., is not a myth, but enshrines the shuddering memory of an actual moral catastrophe in the beginning of our race, which brought death into the world and all our woe.

Coming now to deal a little more closely with these narratives, I suppose I ought to say something on the critical aspect of the question. But this I must pass over briefly, for I want to get to more important matters. In two points only I would desire to indicate my decided break with current critical theory. The one is the carrying down of the whole Levitical system and history connected with it to the post-exilian age. That, I believe, is not a sound result of criticism, but one which in a very short time will have to be abandoned, as indeed it is already being abandoned or greatly modified in influential quarters. This applies specially to the date of Gen. 1. Professor Delitzsch, a commentator often cited as having come round practically to the newer critical view, takes a firm stand here. In his new commentary on Gen. 1 he tells us: "The essential matters in the account of the creation are among the most ancient foundations of the religion of Israel . . . there are no marks of style which constrain us to relegate the Elohistic account of the creation to the Exile . . . it is in any case a tradition reaching back to the Mosaic period." The other point on which I dissent

is the idea that the Israelites began their religious history without the idea of the one true God, Maker of heaven and earth; that they began with a tribal God, the storm god of Sinai or some other local deity, and gradually clothed him from their own minds with the attributes which belong to Jehovah. This, which is the product of the evolutionary theory of religion, and not a fair deduction from any evidence we possess, I entirely disbelieve, and I am glad to say that this view also is being greatly modified or parted with. It is this theory, however, which lies behind a great deal of the criticism of these Early Narratives of Genesis. Those things, it is said, could not be; those great ideas could not be there; for man at that early stage could not have evolved them. Even God, it appears, could not have given them to him. Our "could be's" however, will have to be ruled by facts, and my contention is that the facts are adverse to the theory as currently set forth.

I come now to the question, Is there any external corroboration or confirmation of these Early Narratives in Genesis? Here let me say a little of the relation of these narratives to Babylonia. Everyone has heard something of the wonderful discoveries in Babylonia, and it would be difficult to exaggerate the brilliance and importance of these marvellous discoveries. The point which concerns us chiefly is the extraordinary light thrown on the high culture of early Babylonia. Here, long before the time of Abraham, we find ourselves in the midst of cities, arts, laws, letters, books, libraries, and Abraham's own age—that of Hammurabi—was the bloomtime of this civilization. Instead of Israel being a people just emerging from the dim dawn of barbarism, we find in the light of these discoveries that it was a people on

whom from its own standpoint the ends of the earth had come—heir to the riches of a civilization extending milleniums into the past. If you say this creates a difficulty in representing the chronology (I may touch on this later), I answer that it gives much greater help by showing how the knowledge of very ancient things could be safely handed down. For us the chief interest of these discoveries is the help it gives us in answering the question, How far do these narratives in Genesis embody for us the oldest traditions of our race? There are two reasons which lead us to look with some confidence to Babylonia for the answer to this question. For one thing, in early Babylonia we are already far back into the times to which many of these traditions relate; for another, the Bible itself points to Babylonia as the original city of those traditions. Eden was in Babylonia, as shown by its rivers, the Euphrates and Tigris. It was in Babylonia the Ark was built; and on a mountain in the neighborhood of Babylonia the Ark rested. It was from the Plain of Shinar, in Babylonia, that the new distribution of the race took place. To Babylonia, therefore, if anywhere, we are entitled to look for light on these ancient traditions, and do we not find it? I read sometimes with astonishment of the statement that Babylonian discovery has done little or nothing for the confirmation of these old parts of Genesis—has rather proved that they belong to the region of the mythical.

Take only one or two examples: I leave over meanwhile the Babylonian story of the Creation and the Flood, and take that old tenth chapter of Genesis, the "Table of Nations." Professor Kautzsch, of Halle, a critic of note, says of that old table, "The so-called

Table of Nations remains, according to all results of monumental exploration, an ethnographic original document of the first rank which nothing can replace.'' In this tenth chapter of Genesis, verses 8-10, we have certain statements about the origin of Babylonian civilization. We learn (1) that Babylonia is the oldest of civilizations; (2) that Assyrian civilization was derived from Babylonia; and (3) strangest of all, that the founders of Babylonian civilization were not Semites, but Hamites—descendents of Cush. Each of these statements was in contradiction to old classical notices and to what was currently believed till recently about those ancient peoples. Yet it will not be disputed that exploration has justified the Bible on each of these points. Assyria, undoubtedly, was younger than Babylonia; it derived its civilization, arts, religion, institutions, all that it had, from Babylonia. Strangest of all, the originators of Babylonian civilization, the Accadians, or Sumerians, were a people not of Semitic, but apparently of Turanian or what the Bible would call Hamitic stock. Take another instance; in verse 22 Elam appears as the son of Shem, but here was a difficulty. The Elamites of history were not a Semitic, but an Aryan people, and their language was Aryan. Even Prof. Hommel, in defending the ancient Hebrew tradition, thought he had to admit an error here. But was there? A French expedition went out to excavate Susa, the capital of Elam, and below the ruins of the historical Elam discovered bricks and other remains of an older civilization, with Babylonian inscriptions showing the people to be of Semitic stock; so Elam was, after all, the son of Shem. In the story of the Tower of Babel in chapter 11, again is it not interesting to find the

Bible deriving all the streams of mankind from the Plain of Shimar, and to find archæology bringing corroborative proof that probably all the greater streams of civilization do take their origin from this region? For that is the view to which the opinions of scholars now tend.

Glance now at the stories of Creation, of Paradise, and the Deluge. The story of Paradise and the Fall we may dismiss in this connection, for except in the case of the picture on an ancient seal which does bear some relation to the story of the temptation in Eden, there has yet been no proper parallel to the Bible story of the Fall. On the other hand, from the ruins of Assyrian libraries have been disinterred fragments of an account of Creation, and the Babylonian version of the story of the Deluge, both of which have been brought into comparison with the narratives of the Bible. Little need be said of the Babylonian Creation story. It is a debased, polytheistic, long-drawn-out, mythical affair, without order, only here and there suggesting analogies to the Divine works in Genesis. The Flood story has much more resemblance, but it too is debased and mythical, and lacks wholly in the higher ideas which give its character to the Biblical account. Yet this is the quarry from which our critical friends will have us derive the narratives in the Bible. The Israelites borrowed them, it is thought, and purified these confused polytheistic legends and made them the vehicles of nobler teaching. We need not discuss the time and manner of this borrowing, for I cannot see my way to accept this version of events at all. There is not only no proof that these stories were borrowed in their crude form from the Babylonians, but the contrast in spirit and character

between the Babylonian products and the Bible's seems to me to forbid any such derivation. The debased form may conceivably arise from corruption of the higher, but not *vice versa*. Much rather may we hold with scholars like Delitzsch and Kittel, that the relation is one of cognateness, not of derivation. These traditions came down from a much older source, and are preserved by the Hebrews in their purer form. This appears to me to explain the phenomena as no theory of derivation can do, and it is in accordance with the Bible's own representation of the line of revelation from the beginning along which the sacred tradition can be transmitted.

Leaving Babylonia, I must now say a few words on the scientific and historical aspects of these narratives. Science is invoked to prove that the narratives of Creation in Genesis 1, the story of man's origin and fall in chapters 2 and 3, the account of Patriarchal longevity in chapters 5 and 11, the story of the Deluge, and other matters, must all be rejected because in patent contradiction to the facts of modern knowledge. I would ask you, however, to suspend judgment until we have looked at the relation in which these two things, science and the Bible, stand to each other. When science is said to contradict the Bible, I should like to ask first, What is meant by contradiction here? It may be granted at once to the objectors that the Bible was never given to anticipate or forestall the discoveries of modern twentieth century science. The Bible, as every sensible interpreter of Scripture has always held, takes the world as it is, not as it is seen through the eyes of twentieth-century specialists, but as it lies spread out before the eyes of original men, and uses the popular every-day

language appropriate to this standpoint. As Calvin in his commentary on Genesis 1 says: "Moses wrote in the popular style, which, without instruction, all ordinary persons endowed with common sense are able to understand. . . He does not call us up to heaven; he only proposes things that lie open before our eyes." It does not follow that because the Bible does not teach modern science, we are justified in saying that it contradicts it. What I see in these narratives of Genesis is that, so true is the standpoint of the author, so Divine the illumination with which he is endowed, so unerring his insight into the order of nature, there is little in his description that even yet, with our advanced knowledge, we need to change. You say there is the "six days" and the question whether those days are meant to be measured by the twenty-four hours of the sun's revolution around the earth—I speak of these things popularly. It is difficult to see how they should be so measured when the sun that is to measure them is not introduced until the fourth day. Do not think that this larger reading of the days is a new speculation. You find Augustine in early times declaring that it is hard or altogether impossible to say of what fashion these days are, and Thomas Aquinas, in the middle ages, leaves the matter an open question. To my mind these narratives in Genesis stand out as a marvel, not for its discordance with science, but for its agreement with it.

Time does not permit me to enter into the details of the story of man's origin in Genesis, but I have already indicated the general point of view from which I think this narrative is to be regarded. It would be well if those who speak of disagreement with science would look to the great truths embedded in these narratives which

science may be called upon to confirm. There is, for example: (1) The truth that man is the last of God's created works—the crown and summit of God's creation. Does science contradict that? (2) There is the great truth of the unity of the human race. No ancient people that I know of believed in such unity of the race, and even science until recently cast doubts upon it. How strange to find this great truth of the unity of the mankind confirmed in the pages of the Bible from the very beginning. This truth holds in it already the doctrine of monotheism, for if God is the Creator of the beings from whom the whole race sprang, he is the God of the whole race that sprang from them. (3) There is the declaration that man was made in God's image—that God breathed into man a spirit akin to his own—does the science of man's nature contradict that, or does it not rather show that in his personal, spiritual nature man stands alone as bearing the image of God on earth, and founds a new kingdom in the world which can only be carried back in its origin to the Divine creative cause. (4) I might cite even the region of man's origin, for I think science increasingly points to this very region in Babylonia as the seat of man's origin. Is it then the picture of the condition in which man was created, pure and unfallen, and the idea that man, when introduced into the world, was not left as an orphaned being—the Divine care was about him—that God spoke with him and made known His will to him in such forms as he was able to apprehend—is it this that is in contradiction with history? It lies outside the sphere of science to contradict this. Personally, I do not know of any worthier conception than that which supposes God to have placed Himself in communication

with man, in living relations with His moral creatures, from the verey first. Certainly there would be contradiction if Darwinian theory had its way and we had to conceive of man as a slow, gradual ascent from the bestial stage, but I am convinced, and have elsewhere sought to show, that genuine science teaches no such doctrine. Evolution is not to be identified offhand with Darwinianism. Later evolutionary theory may rather be described as a revolt against Darwinianism, and leaves the story open to a conception of man quite in harmony with that of the Bible. Of the Fall, I have already said that if the story of it were not in the Bible we should require to put it there for ourselves in order to explain the condition of the world as it is.

On the question of patriarchial longevity, I would only say that there is here on the one hand the question of interpretation, for, as the most conservative theologians have come gradually to see, the names in these genealogies are not necessarily to be construed as only individuals. But I would add that I am not disposed to question the tradition of the extraordinary longevity in those olden times. Death, as I understand it, is not a necessary part of man's lot at all. Had man not sinned, he would never have died. Death—the separation of soul and body, the two integral parts of his nature—is something for him abnormal, unnatural. It is not strange, then, that in the earliest period life should have been much longer than it became afterward. Even a physiologist like Weissmann tells us that the problem for science to-day is—not why organisms live so long, but why they ever die.

I have referred to the Babylonian story of the Flood, and can only add a word on the alleged contradiction

of science on this subject. Very confident statements are often made as to the impossibility of such a submergence of the inhabited world, and destruction of human and animal life as the Bible represents. It would be well if those who speak thus confidently would study the accumulated evidence which distinguished scientific men have brought forward, that such a catastrophe as Genesis describes is not only possible, but has actually taken place since the advent of man. My attention was first drawn to this subject by an interesting lecture by the late Duke of Argyle given in Glasgow, and the same view has been advocated by other eminent geological specialists on glacial and post-glacial times, as Prestwich, Dawson, Howorth, Dr. Wright, etc. The universal terms employed need not be read as extending beyond the regions inhabited by man. There seems to be no substantial reason for doubting that in the Flood of Noah we have an actual historical occurrence of which traditions appear to have survived in most regions of the world.

Time fails to speak further on these great subjects, and I may close by simply quoting the eloquent words of Herder on those early chapters. With his language I associate myself: "This is a wonder," he says, "to which the worshippers of reason have not yet given a name—the story of the Fall of the first man. Is it allegory—history—fable? And yet there it stands following the account of the Creation, one of the pillars of Hercules beyond which there is nothing—the point from which all succeeding history starts . . . and yet, ye dear, most ancient and undying traditions of my race, ye are the very kernel and germ of its most hardened history. Without you mankind would be what

so many things are—a book with a title, without the first leaves and introduction. With you our race receives a foundation, a stem and root, even in God and in father Adam.''

NOTE.—In later lectures and in answers to questions Dr. Orr explained his positions on certain points which had arisen in local discussion. He did not regard the narratives of Creation, the Fall, the Flood, etc., as myths, but as narratives enshrining the knowledge or memory of real transactions. The creation of the world was certainly not a myth, but a fact, and the representation of the stages of creation dealt likewise with facts. The language used was not that of modern science, but, under Divine guidance, the sacred writer gives a broad, general picture which conveys a true idea of the order of the Divine working in creation. It is a marvel for its agreement with science, not for its disagreement with it. Man's fall was likewise a tremendous fact, with universal consequences in sin and death to the race. Man's origin, he believed, could only be explained through an exercise of direct creative activity, whatever subordinate factors evolution may have contributed. The flood was an historical fact, and the preservation of Noah and his family is one of the best and most widely attested of human traditions. In these narratives in Genesis and the facts which they embody are really laid the foundation of all else in the Bible. The unity of revelation binds them up with the Christian Gospel.

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